

A Letter to an Indian about Alcohol

POLAR PAM 3911



The N'Amerind Friendship Centre in London, Ontario has a project designed to increase the awareness of the native community to many of the social and health issues that are of direct concern to them. In 1978, the executive director, Art Honyust, requested that Mario Faveri of the Foundation's London office prepare a brief article about alcohol for the N'Amerind monthly newsletter. This pamphlet reproduces the article, written in the form of an open letter. According to Dr. Faveri, a community and consulting psychologist, "It's important that people understand that there are many factors associated with the alcohol problem among our native people. The letter draws attention to one facet of the problem only. I sincerely hope that concerned persons will seek out works that deal with the problem in a more comprehensive manner."

Traditional North American Indian designs reproduced by courtesy of Dover Publications.

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Dear Art:

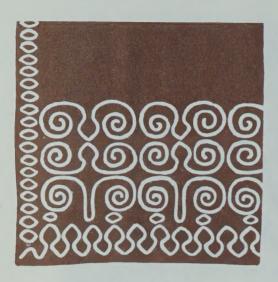
One of the things that I liked about being asked to write a few lines about alcohol for your newsletter is that it placed me on the spot. What I heard you really saying to me was, "Mario, here is your chance to talk to us. You have two minutes or 200 words to tell us what you think is the most important thing for us to know about alcohol."

Art, I found myself gulping and gasping for air. My mind was racing over all it could recall about alcohol and the causes of alcoholism among native people. The question also kept racing through my mind: "What can I say that is really important? Something that will be useful or helpful to the native person as a human being — a father, a mother, uncle or aunt, brother or sister?"

Art, this is an almost impossible task. But, after a few moments of reflection, the answer starts to become clear. It is this....

The behavior of human beings is often determined by a simple principle: "I will be what I believe I'll be."

A lot of the time our behavior and lives reflect what are called "self-fulfilling prophecies." That is, some people really believe that they are destined to fail, lose, become a criminal, an addict, an alcoholic, or what have you. And because they really believe this, they behave in ways



which cause them to fulfill their prophecies about themselves. Yes, they actually do things to make themselves fail, lose, become alcoholic, and so on.

Well, where do these prophecies or ideas about ourselves come from? They come from the mouths of our parents, relatives, friends, teachers, community leaders, and from our own experience. The reality is: If I continue to tell my children they are stupid even though they are not; that they are no good when they are; that they will never make it in school though they can; or if I tell them that they will become alcoholics, then I can fully expect them to behave that way. They will grow up believing themselves to be stupid or no good; they will fail in school and, yes, they will have drinking problems if it is expected of them. The important point is my children will do what I expect them to do and become what I expect them to be. Naturally, if I have grown up to be a person with these ideas about myself, then I, too, will behave in the same way.

It is important that we look at the self-fulfilling prophecies that we all have. For example, what do you tell your children and yourself about alcohol, either through your words or your actions? Are you setting yourself and your children up to believe the white man's myths about



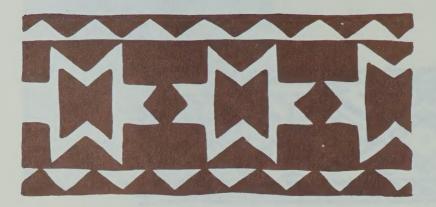
Indians and alcohol? What I mean is — do you believe deep down in the bottom of your gut where one is truly honest with one's self, that because you are an Indian you were born with a craving for alcohol? That you were born with a weakness for liquor? That because you are Indian you cannot handle it, therefore, lose control when you drink?

Do you believe that drinking among Indians always leads to disastrous consequences? That alcohol always causes Indians to become drunk and disorderly? That alcohol destroys an Indian's ability to think more than it does a white's? Or, that Indians who drink are more likely to become alcoholics than are whites?

Do you believe that you are one drink away from being a drunk because you are Indian? And finally, do you really deep down believe that Indians who drink are doomed to become alcoholics?

All of these beliefs or ideas about Indians and alcohol are myths. They are false. They are wrong.

It is bad enough for white people to have these mistaken ideas about you. It is worse if you have come to believe them about yourself. Why? Because they will become self-fulfilling prophecies. If you believe you cannot handle your liquor because you are Indian, you will not be able to. If you believe you are destined to become drunk or an alcoholic



because you are an Indian, you will allow yourself to and likely become one. The list goes on and on.

If you believe these myths, you will also use them as excuses for the difficulties you may be having with alcohol right now. Indians who have these ideas about themselves will make their efforts to overcome an alcohol problem next to impossible.

Perhaps the greatest danger in holding these ideas about yourself and alcohol is that you will pass them on to your children and grand-children. Yes, they, too, will come to see themselves as helpless victims of alcohol with no control over it. The result? They, too, will live out their self-fulfilling prophecies and the alcohol problem will continue within your family from generation to generation.

I am overwhelmed when I think of the many losses that Indians have experienced since the arrival of the white man. To lose your land and way of life is an enormous tragedy. But to lose your beliefs in yourself, and about yourself, and to replace them with others that are clearly wrong is perhaps the most devastating of all your losses.

Well, where can you start in order to get back some of what you have lost? A good starting point lies in this important human principle: "We feel best about ourselves when we think for ourselves and take respon-



sibility for our own behavior and actions."

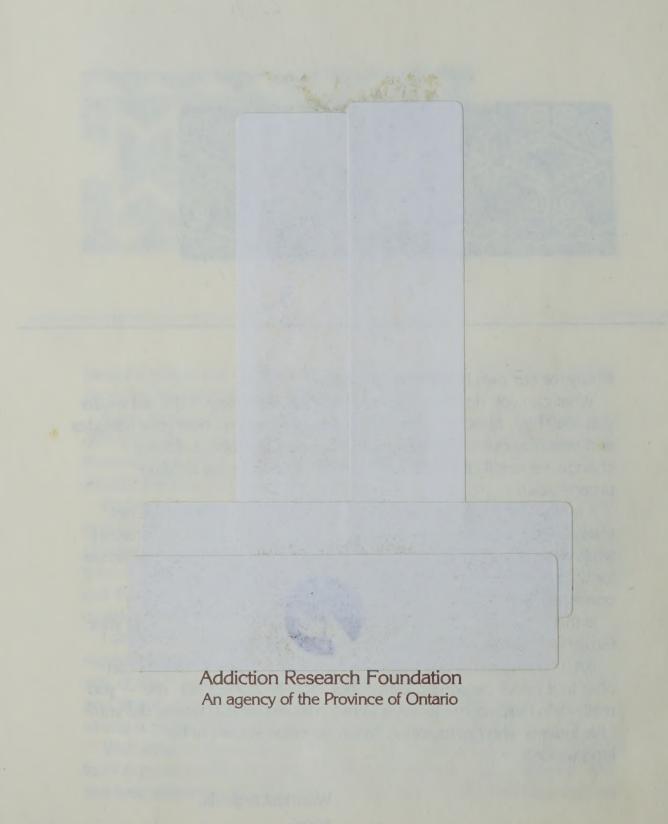
What can you do? You can and must get rid of any of the old myths you may have about alcohol. You have some control over your attitudes and beliefs about it. It is important that your ideas about alcohol change, especially if they are serving as destructive self-fulfilling prophecies.

It is important to understand that self-fulfilling prophecies are not always bad ones. They can be good, too. If I believe that I am a worth-while person, I will behave like one. If I believe there is hope, my behavior will show it and I will experience its power and dramatic consequences.

Is there hope for preventing alcohol problems being passed in your family from generation to generation? You bet there is!

Art, I have given what I believe is the most important advice I can offer to a native person about alcohol. Now be honest with me — you really didn't expect me to say it in two minutes or 200 words, did you? Like Indians who get together, Italians are also known to be long-winded.

Warmest regards, Mario



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